

A COUP

A Story

The coup began at seven on Sunday morning. It was a grey and windless dawn and the grey Atlantic rollers broke in long even lines along the beach. The palms above the tidemark shivered in a current of cooler air that blew in off the breakers. Out at sea — beyond the surf — there were several black fishing canoes. Buzzards were circling above the market, swooping now and then to snatch up scraps of offal. The butchers were working, even on a Sunday.

We were in a taxi when the coup began, on our way to another country. We had passed the Hôtel de la Plage, passed the Sûreté Nationale, and then we drove under a limply-flapping banner which said, in red letters, that Marxist-Leninism was the one and only guide. In front of the Presidential Palace was a road-block. A soldier waved us to a halt, and then waved us on.

'Pourriture!' said my friend Domingo, and grinned.

Domingo was a young, honey-coloured mulatto with a flat and friendly face, a curly moustache and a set of dazzling teeth. He was the direct descendant of Francisco Felix de Souza, a Brazilian slave-dealer about whom I was writing a book.

Domingo had two wives. The first wife was old and the skin hung in loose folds off her back. The second wife was hardly more than a child. We were on our way to Togo, to

watch a football game, and to visit his great-uncle who knew a lot of old stories about the slaver.

The taxi was jammed with football fans. On my right sat a very black old man wrapped in green and orange cotton. His teeth were also orange from chewing cola nuts, and from time to time he spat.

Outside the Presidential Palace hung an outsize poster of the Head of State, and two much smaller posters of Lenin and Kim Il Sung. Beyond the road-block, we took a right fork, on through the old European section where there were bungalows and balks of bougainvillaea by the gates. Along the sides of the tarmac, market-women walked in single file with basins and baskets balanced on their heads.

'What's that?' I asked. There was some kind of commotion, up ahead, towards the airport.

'Accident!' Domingo shrugged.

The women were screaming, and scattering their yams and pineapples, and rushing for the shelter of the gardens. A white Peugeot shot down the middle of the road, swerving right and left to miss the women, and then, we heard the crack of gunfire.

'C'est la guerre!' our driver shouted, and spun the taxi round.

'I knew it.' Domingo grabbed my arm. 'I knew it.'

The sun was up by the time we got to downtown Cotonou. In the taxi-park the crowd had panicked and overturned a brazier. A stack of crates had caught fire. A policeman blew his whistle and bawled for water. Above the rooftops, there was a column of black smoke, rising.

'They're burning the Palace,' said Domingo. 'Quick! Run!'

We ran, bumped into other running figures, and ran on. A man shouted, 'Mercenary!' and lunged for my shoulder. I ducked and we dodged down a sidestreet. A boy in a red shirt beckoned me into a bar. It was dark inside. People were clustered round a radio. Then the bartender screamed (wildly,

in African) at me. And suddenly I was out again on the dusty red street, shielding my head with my arms, pushed and pummelled against the corrugated building by four hard, acridly-sweating men until the gendarmes came to fetch me in a jeep.

'For your own proper protection,' their officer said, as the handcuffs snapped around my wrists.

The last I saw of Domingo he was standing in the street, crying, as the jeep drove off, and he vanished in a clash of coloured cottons.

In the barracks guardroom a skinny boy, stripped to a pair of purple underpants, sat hunched against the wall. His hands and feet were bound with rope, and he had the greyish look Africans get when they are truly frightened. A gecko hung motionless on the whitewash. Outside the door there was a papaya with a tall scaly trunk and yellowing fruit. A mud-wall ran along the far side of the compound. Beyond the wall the noise of gunfire continued, and the high-pitched wailing of women.

A corporal came in and searched me. He was small, wiry, angular, and his cheekbones shone. He took my watch, wallet, passport and notebook.

'Mercenary!' he said, pointing to the patch-pocket on the leg of my khaki trousers. His gums were spongy and his breath was foul.

'No,' I said, submissively. 'I'm a tourist.'

'Mercenary!' he shrieked, and slapped my face — not hard, but hard enough to hurt.

He held up my fountain-pen. 'What?'

'A pen,' I said.

'What for?'

'To write with.'

'A gun?'

'Not a gun.'

'Yes, a gun!'

I sat on a bench, staring at the skinny boy who continued to stare at his toes. The corporal sat cross-legged in the doorway with his sub-machine-gun trained on me. Outside in the yard, two sergeants were distributing rifles, and a truck was loading up with troops. The troops sat down with the barrels sticking up from their crotches. The colonel came out of his office and took the salute. The truck lurched off, and he walked over, lumpily, towards the guardroom.

The corporal snapped to attention, and pointed to me. 'Mercenary, Comrade Colonel!'

'From today,' said the colonel, 'there are no more comrades in our country.'

'Yes, Comrade Colonel,' the man nodded; but checked himself and added, 'Yes, my Colonel.'

The colonel waved him aside and surveyed me gloomily. He wore an exquisitely-pressed pair of paratrooper fatigues, a red star on his cap, and another red star in his lapel. A roll of fat stood out around the back of his neck, his thick lips drooped at the corners. He looked, I thought, so like a sad hippopotamus. I told myself I mustn't think he looks like a sad hippopotamus. Whatever happens, he mustn't think I think he looks like a sad hippopotamus.

'Ah, monsieur!' he said, in a quiet dispirited voice. 'What are you doing in this poor country of ours?'

'I came here as a tourist.'

'You are English?'

'Yes.'

'But you speak an excellent French.'

'Passable,' I said.

'With a Parisian accent I should have said.'

'I have lived in Paris.'

'I, also, have visited Paris. A wonderful city!'

'The most wonderful city.'

'But you have mistimed your visit to Benin.'

'Yes,' I faltered. 'I seem to have run into trouble.'

'You have been here before?'

'Once,' I said. 'Five years ago.'

'When Benin was Dahomey.'

'Yes,' I said. 'I used to think Benin was in Nigeria.'

'Benin is in Nigeria and now we have it here.'

'I think I understand.'

'Calm yourself, monsieur.' His fingers reached to unlock my handcuffs. 'We are having another little change of politics. Nothing more! In these situations one must keep calm. You understand? Calm!'

Some boys had come through the barracks' gate and were creeping forward to peer at the prisoner. The colonel appeared in the doorway, and they scampered off.

'Come,' he said. 'You will be safer if you stay with me. Come, let us listen to the Head of State.'

We walked across the parade-ground to his office where he sat me in a chair and reached for a portable radio. Above his desk hung a photo of the Head of State, in a Fidel Castro cap. His cheeks were a basketwork of scarifications.

'The Head of State', said the colonel, 'is always speaking over the radio. We call it the *journal parlé*. It is a crime in this country *not* to listen to the *journal parlé*.'

He turned the knob. The military music came in crackling bursts.

Citizens of Benin . . . the hour is grave. At seven hours this morning, an unidentified DC-8 jet aircraft landed at our International Airport of Cotonou, carrying a crapulous crowd of mercenaries . . . black and white . . . financed by the lackeys of international imperialism . . . A vile plot to destroy our democratic and operational regime.

The colonel laid his jowls on his hands and sighed, 'The Sombas! The Sombas!'

The Sombas came from the far north-west of the country. They filed their teeth to points and once, not so long ago, were cannibals.

'... launched a vicious attack on our Presidential Palace ...

I glanced up again at the wall. The Head of State was a Somba - and the colonel was a Fon.

'... the population is requested to arm itself with stones and knives to kill this crapulous ...'

'A recorded message,' said the colonel, and turned the volume down. 'It was recorded yesterday.'

'You mean ...'

'Calm yourself, monsieur. You do not understand. In this country one understands nothing.'

Certainly, as the morning wore on, the colonel understood less and less. He did not, for example, understand why, on the nine o'clock communiqué, the mercenaries had landed in a DC-8 jet, while at ten the plane had changed to a DC-7 turboprop. Around eleven the music cut off again and the Head of State announced a victory for the Government Forces. The enemy, he said, were retreating *en catastrophe* for the marshes of Ouidah.

'There has been a mistake,' said the colonel, looking very shaken. 'Excuse me, monsieur. I must leave you.'

He hesitated on the threshold and then stepped out into the sunlight. The hawks made swift spiralling shadows on the ground. I helped myself to a drink from his water-flask. The shooting sounded further off now, and the town was quieter. Ten minutes later, the corporal marched into the office. I put my hands above my head, and he escorted me back to the guardroom.

It was very hot. The skinny boy had been taken away, and on the bench at the back sat a Frenchman.

Outside, tied to the papaya, a springer spaniel was panting and straining at its leash. A pair of soldiers squatted on their hams and tried to dismantle the Frenchman's shotgun. A third soldier, rummaging in his game-bag, was laying out a few brace of partridge and a guinea-fowl.

'Will you please give that dog some water?' the Frenchman asked.

'Eh?' The corporal bared his gums.

'The dog,' he pointed. 'Water!'

'No.'

'What's going on?' I asked.

'The monkeys are wrecking my gun and killing my dog.'

'Out there, I mean.'

'*Coup monté*.'

'Which means?'

'You hire a plane-load of mercenaries to shoot up the town.

See who your friends are and who are your enemies. Shoot the enemies. Simple!'

'Clever.'

'Very.'

'And us?'

'They might need a corpse or two. As proof!'

'Thank you,' I said.

'I was joking.'

'Thanks all the same.'

The Frenchman was a water-engineer. He worked up-country, on Artesian wells, and had come down to the capital on leave. He was a short, muscular man, tending to paunch, with cropped grey hair and a web of white laugh-lines over his leathery cheeks. He had dressed himself *en mercenaire*, in fake python-skin camouflage, to shoot a few game-birds in the forest on the outskirts of town.

'What do you think of my costume?' he asked.

'Suitable,' I said.

'Thank you.'

The sun was vertical. The colour of the parade-ground had bleached to a pinkish orange, and the soldiers strutted back and forth in their own pools of shade. Along the wall the vultures flexed their wings.

'Waiting,' joked the Frenchman.

'Thank you.'

'Don't mention it.'

Our view of the morning's entertainment was restricted by the width of the doorframe. We were, however, able to witness a group of soldiers treating their ex-colonel in a most shabby fashion. We wondered how he could still be alive as they dragged him out and bundled him into the back of a jeep. The corporal had taken the colonel's radio, and was cradling it on his knee. The Head of State was baying for blood — '*Mort aux mercenaires soit qu'ils sont noirs ou blancs*'... The urchins, too, were back in force, jumping up and down, drawing their fingers across their throats, and chanting in unison, '*Mort aux mercenaires!*'... *Mort aux mercenaires!*'...

Around noon, the jeep came back. A lithe young woman jumped out and started screeching orders at an infantry platoon. She was wearing a mud-stained battledress. A nest of plaits curled, like snakes, from under her beret.

'So,' said my companion. 'The new colonel.'

'An Amazon colonel,' I said.

'I always said it,' he said. 'Never trust a teenage Amazon colonel.'

He passed me a cigarette. There were two in the packet and I took one of them.

'Thanks,' I said. 'I don't smoke.'

He lit mine, and then his, and blew a smoke-ring at the rafters. The gecko on the wall hadn't budged.

'My name's Jacques,' he said.

I told him my own name and he said, 'I don't like the look of this.'

'Nor I,' I said.

'No,' he said. 'There are no rules in this country.'

Nor were there any rules, none that one could think of, when the corporal came back from conferring with the Amazon and ordered us, also, to strip to our underpants. I hesitated. I was unsure whether I was wearing underpants. But a barrel in the small of my back convinced me, underpants or no, that my trousers would have to come down — only to

find that I did, after all, have on a pair of pink and white boxer shorts from Brooks Brothers.

Jacques was wearing green string pants. We must have looked a pretty couple — my back welked all over with mosquito bites, he with his paunch flopping over the elastic — as the corporal marched us out, barefoot over the burning ground, and stood us, hands up, against the wall which the vultures had fouled with their ash-white, ammonia-smelling droppings.

'Merde!' said Jacques. 'Now what?'

What indeed? I was not frightened. I was tired and hot. My arms ached, my knees sagged, my tongue felt like leather, and my temples throbbed. But this was not frightening. It was too like a B-movie to be frightening. I began to count the flecks of millet-chaff embedded in the mud-plaster wall...

I remembered the morning, five years earlier, my first morning in Dahomey, under the tall trees in Parakou. I'd had a rough night, coming down from the desert in the back of a crowded truck, and at breakfast-time, at the café-routier, I'd asked the waiter what there was to see in town.

'Patrice.'

'Patrice?'

'That's me,' he grinned. 'And, monsieur, there are hundreds of other beautiful young girls and boys who walk, all the time, up and down the streets of Parakou.'

I remembered, too, the girl who sold pineapples at Dassa-Zoumbé station. It had been a stifling day, the train slow and the country burnt. I had been reading Gide's *Nouritures terrestres* and, as we drew into Dassa, had come to the line '*Ô cafés — où notre démente s'est continuée très avant dans la nuit*'... No, I thought, this will never do, and looked out of the carriage window. A basket of pineapples had halted outside. The girl underneath the basket smiled and, when I gave her the Gide, gasped, lobbed all six pineapples into the carriage, and ran off to show her friends — who in turn came skipping

down the tracks, clamouring, 'A book, please? A book? A book!' So out went a dog-eared thriller and Saint-Exupéry's *Vol de nuit*, and in came the 'Fruits of the Earth' — the real ones — pawpaws, guavas, more pineapples, a raunch of grilled swamp-rat, and a palm-leaf hat.

'Those girls', I remember scribbling in my notebook, 'are the ultimate products of the lycée system.'

And now what?

The Amazon was squawking at the platoon and we strained our ears for the click of safety catches.

'I think they're playing games,' Jacques said, squinting sideways.

'I should hope so,' I muttered. I liked Jacques. It was good, if one had to be here, to be here with him. He was an old Africa hand and had been through coups before.

'That is,' he added glumly, 'if they don't get drunk.'

'Thank you,' I said, and looked over my shoulder at the drill-squad.

'No look!' the corporal barked. He was standing beside us, his shirt-front open to the navel. Obviously, he was anxious to cut a fine figure.

'Stick your belly-button in,' I muttered in English.

'No speak!' he threatened.

'I won't speak.' I held the words within my teeth. 'But stay there. Don't leave me. I need you.'

Maddened by the heat and excitement, the crowds who had come to gawp were clamouring, '*Mort aux mercenaires!* ... *Mort aux mercenaires!*' and my mind went racing back over the horrors of Old Dahomey, before the French came. I thought, the slave-wars, the human sacrifices, the piles of broken skulls. I thought of Domingo's other uncle, 'The Brazilian', who received us on his rocking-chair dressed in white ducks and a topee. 'Yes,' he sighed, 'the Dahomeans are a charming and intelligent people. Their only weakness is a certain nostalgia for taking heads.'

No. This was not my Africa. Not this rainy, rotten-fruit Africa. Not this Africa of blood and slaughter. The Africa I loved was the long undulating savannah country to the north, the 'leopard-spotted land', where flat-topped acacias stretched as far as the eye could see, and there were black-and-white hornbills and tall red termitaries. For whenever I went back to that Africa, and saw a camel caravan, a view of white tents, or a single blue turban far off in the heat haze, I knew that, no matter what the Persians said, Paradise never was a garden but a waste of white thorns.

'I am dreaming,' said Jacques, suddenly, 'of perdrix aux choux.'

'I'd take a dozen Belons and a bottle of Krug.'

'No speak!' The corporal waved his gun, and I braced myself, half-expecting the butt to crash down on my skull.

And so what? What would it matter when already I felt as if my skull were split clean open? Was this, I wondered, sun-stroke? How strange, too, as I tried to focus on the wall, that each bit of chaff should bring back some clear specific memory of food or drink?

There was a lake in Central Sweden and, in the lake, there was an island where the ospreys nested. On the first day of the crayfish season we rowed to the fisherman's hut and rowed back towing twelve dozen crayfish in a live-net. That evening, they came in from the kitchen, a scarlet mountain smothered in dill. The northern sunlight bounced off the lake into the bright white room. We drank akvavit from thimble-sized glasses and we ended the meal with a tart made of cloudberry. I could taste again the grilled sardines we ate on the quay at Douarnenez and see my father demonstrating how his father ate sardines *à la mordecai*: you took a live sardine by the tail and swallowed it. Or the elvers we had in Madrid, fried in oil with garlic and half a red pepper. It had been a cold spring morning, and we'd spent two hours in the Prado, gazing at the Velasquezes, hugging one another it was so

good to be alive: we had cancelled our bookings on a plane that had crashed. Or the lobsters we bought at Cape Split Harbour, Maine. There was a notice-board in the shack on the jetty and, pinned to it, a card on which a widow thanked her husband's friends for their contributions, and prayed, prayed to the Lord, that they lashed themselves to the boat when hauling in the pots.

How long, O Lord, how long? How long, when all the world was wheeling, could I stay on my feet . . . ?

How long I shall never know, because the next thing I remember I was staggering groggily across the parade-ground, with one arm over the corporal's shoulder and the other over Jacques's. Jacques then gave me a glass of water and, after that, he helped me into my clothes.

'You passed out,' he said.

'Thank you,' I said.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'They are only playing games.'

It was late afternoon now. The corporal was in a better mood and allowed us to sit outside the guardroom. The sun was still hot. My head was still aching, but the crowd had simmered down and fortunately, for us, this particular section of the Benin Proletarian Army had found a new source of amusement — in the form of three Belgian ornithologists, whom they had taken prisoner in a swamp, along with a Leica lens the shape and size of a mortar.

The leader of the expedition was a beefy, red-bearded fellow. He believed, apparently, that the only way to deal with Africans was to shout. Jacques advised him to shut his mouth; but when one of the subalterns started tinkering with the Leica, the Belgian went off his head. How dare they? How dare they touch his camera? How dare they think they were mercenaries? Did they look like mercenaries?

'And I suppose they're mercenaries, too?' He waved his arms at us.

'I told you to shut your mouth,' Jacques repeated.

The Belgian took no notice and went on bellowing to be set free. *At once! Now! Or else! Did he hear that?*

Yes. The subaltern had heard, and smashed his fist into the Belgian's face. I never saw anyone crumple so quickly. The blood gushed down his beard, and he fell. The subaltern kicked him when he was down. He lay on the dirt floor, whimpering.

'Idiot!' Jacques growled.

'Poor Belgium,' I said.

The next few hours I would prefer to forget. I do, however, remember that when the corporal brought back my things I cursed, 'Christ, they've nicked my traveller's cheques' — and Jacques, squeezing my arm very tightly, whispered, 'Now you keep your mouth shut!' I remember 'John Brown's Body' playing loudly over the radio, and the Head of State inviting the population, this time, to gather up the corpses. *Ramasser les cadavres* is what he said, in a voice so hoarse and sinister you knew a great many people had died, or would do. And I remember, at sunset, being driven by minibus to the Gezo Barracks where hundreds of soldiers, all elated by victory, were embracing one another, and kissing.

Our new guards made us undress again, and we were shut up, with other suspected mercenaries, in a disused ammunition shed. 'Well,' I thought, at the sight of so many naked bodies, 'there must be some safety in numbers.'

It was stifling in the shed. The other whites seemed cheerful, but the blacks hung their heads between their knees, and shook. After dark, a missionary doctor, who was an old man, collapsed and died of a heart-attack. The guards took him out on a stretcher, and we were taken to the Sûreté for questioning.

Our interrogator was a gaunt man with hollow temples, a cap of woolly white hair and bloodshot slits for eyes. He sat sprawled behind his desk, caressing with his fingertips the blade of his bowie-knife. Jacques made me stand a pace behind

him. When his turn came, he said loudly that he was employed by such and such a French engineering company and that I, he added, was an old friend.

'Pass!' snapped the officer. 'Next!'

The officer snatched my passport, thumbed through the pages and began blaming me, personally, for certain events in Southern Africa.

'What are you doing in our country?'

'I'm a tourist.'

'Your case is more complicated. Stand over there.'

I stood like a schoolboy, in the corner, until a female sergeant took me away for fingerprinting. She was a very large sergeant. My head was throbbing; and when I tried to manoeuvre my little finger onto the inepad, she bent it back double; I yelled 'Ayee!' and her boot slammed down on my sandalled foot.

That night there were nine of us, all white, cooped up in a ramshackle office. The President's picture hung aslant on a bright blue wall, and beside it were a broken guitar and a stuffed civet cat, nailed in mockery of the Crucifixion, with its tail and hindlegs together, and its forelegs splayed apart.

In addition to the mosquito bites, my back had come up in watery blisters. My toe was very sore. The guard kicked me awake whenever I nodded off. His cheeks were cicatrised, and I remember thinking how remote his voice sounded when he said, '*On va vous fusiller*'. At two or three in the morning, there was a burst of machine-gun fire close by, and we all thought, This is it. It was only a soldier, drunk or trigger-happy, discharging his magazine at the stars.

None of us was sad to see the first light of day.

It was another greasy dawn and the wind was blowing hard onshore, buffeting the buzzards and bending the coco palms. Across the compound a big crowd was jamming the gate. Jacques then caught sight of his houseboy, and when he waved, the boy waved back. At nine, the French Vice-Consul

put in an appearance, under guard. He was a fat, suet-faced man, who kept wiping the sweat from his forehead and glancing over his shoulder at the bayonet points behind.

'Messieurs,' he stammered, 'this situation is perhaps a little less disagreeable for me than for you. Unfortunately, although we do have stratagems for your release, I am not permitted to discuss your liberty, only the question of food.' 'Eh bien!' Jacques grinned. 'You see my boy over there? Send him to the Boulangerie Gerbe d'Or and bring us sandwiches of jambon, paté and saucisson sec, enough croissants for everyone, and three petits pains au chocolat for me.'

'Oui,' said the Vice-Consul weakly.

I then scribbled my name and passport number on a scrap of paper, and asked him to telex the British Embassy in Lagos.

'I cannot,' he said. 'I cannot be mixed up in this affair.'

He turned his back, and waddled off the way he'd come, with the pair of bayonets following.

'Charming,' I said to Jacques.

'Remember Waterloo,' Jacques said. 'And, besides, you may be a mercenary!'

Half an hour later, Jacques's bright-eyed boy came back with a basket of provisions. Jacques gave the guard a sandwich, spread the rest on the office table, sank his teeth into a petit pain au chocolat, and murmured, '*Byzance!*'

The sight of food had a wonderfully revivifying effect on the Belgian ornithologist. All through the night the three had been weepy and hysterical, and now they were wolfing the sandwiches. They were not my idea of company. I was left alone with them, when, around noon, the citizens of France were set at liberty.

'Don't worry,' Jacques squeezed my hand. 'I'll do what I can.'

He had hardly been gone ten minutes before a big German, with a red face and sweeps of fair hair, came striding across the compound, shouting at the soldiers and brushing the bayonets aside.

He introduced himself as the Counsellor of the German Embassy.

'I'm so sorry you've landed in this mess,' he said in faultless English. 'Our ambassador has made a formal protest. From what I understand, you'll have to pass before some kind of military tribunal. Nothing to worry about! The commander is a nice chap. He's embarrassed about the whole business. But we'll watch you going into the building, and watch you coming out.'

'Thanks,' I said.

'Anyway,' he added, 'the Embassy car is outside, and we're not leaving until everyone's out.'

'Can you tell me what is going on?'

The German lowered his voice: 'Better leave it alone.'

The tribunal began its work at once. I was among the first prisoners to be called. A young zealot started mouthing anti-capitalist formulae until he was silenced by the colonel in charge. The colonel then asked a few perfunctory questions, wearily apologised for the inconvenience, signed my pass, and hoped I would continue to enjoy my holiday in the People's Republic.

'I hope so,' I said.

Outside the gate, I thanked the German who sat in the back of his air-conditioned Mercedes. He smiled, and went on reading the *Frankfurter Zeitung*.

It was grey and muggy and there were not many people on the street. I bought the government newspaper and read its account of the glorious victory. There were pictures of three dead mercenaries — a white man who appeared to be sleeping, and two very mangled blacks. Then I went to the hotel where my bag was in storage.

The manager's wife looked worn and jittery. I checked my bag and found the two traveller's cheques I'd hidden in a sock. I cashed a hundred dollars, took a room, and lay down.

I kept off the streets to avoid the vigilante groups that

roamed the town making citizens' arrests. My toenail was turning black and my head still ached. I ate in the room, and read, and tried to sleep. All the other guests were either Guinean or Algerian.

Around eleven next morning, I was reading the sad story of Mrs Marmeladov in *Crime and Punishment*, and heard the thud of gunfire coming from the Gezo Barracks. I looked from the window at the palms, the hawks, a woman selling mangoes, and a nun coming out of the convent.

Seconds later, the fruit-stall had overturned, the nun bolted, and two armoured cars went roaring up the street.

There was a knock on the door. It was the manager.

'Please, monsieur. You must not look.'

'What's happening?'

'Please,' he pleaded, 'you must shut the window.'

I closed the shutter. The electricity had cut off. A few bars of sunlight squeezed through the slats, but it was too dark to read, so I lay back and listened to the salvos. There must have been a lot of people dying.

There was another knock.

'Come in.'

A soldier came into the room. He was very young and smartly turned out. His fatigues were criss-crossed with ammunition belts and his teeth shone. He seemed extremely nervous. His finger quivered round the trigger-guard. I raised my hands and got up off the bed.

'In there!' He pointed the barrel at the bathroom door.

The walls of the bathroom were covered with blue tiles, and on the blue plastic shower-curtain was a design of tropical fish.

'Money,' said the soldier.

'Sure!' I said. 'How much?'

He said nothing. I glanced at the mirror and saw the gaping whites of his eyes. He was breathing heavily.

I eased my fingers down my trouser pocket: my impulse was to give him all I had. Then I separated one banknote

from the rest, and put it in his outstretched palm.

'*Merci, monsieur!*' His lips expanded in an astonished smile. 'Merci,' he repeated, and unlocked the bathroom door. 'Merci,' he kept repeating, as he bowed and pointed his own way out into the passage.

That young man, it struck me, had very nice manners.

The Algerians and Guineans were men in brown suits who sat all day in the bar, sucking soft drinks through straws and giving me dirty looks whenever I went in. I decided to move to the Hôtel de la Plage where there were other Europeans, and a swimming-pool. I took a towel to go swimming and went into the garden. The pool had been drained: on the morning of the coup, a sniper had taken a pot-shot at a Canadian boy who happened to be swimming his lengths.

The frontiers of the country were closed, and the airport. That evening I ate with a Norwegian oil-man, who insisted that the coup had been a fake. He had seen the mercenaries shelling the Palace. He had watched them drinking opposite in the bar of the Hotel de Cocotiers.

'All of it I saw,' he said, his neck reddening with indignation. The Palace had been deserted. The army had been in the barracks. The mercenaries had shot innocent people. Then they all went back to the airport and flew away.

'All of it,' he said, 'was fake.'

'Well,' I said, 'if it was a fake, it certainly fooled me.'

It took another day for the airport to open, and another two before I got a seat on the Abidjan plane. I had a mild attack of bronchitis and was aching to leave the country.

On my last morning I looked in at the 'Paris-Snack', which, in the old days when Dahomey was Dahomey, was owned by a Corsican called Guerini. He had gone back to Corsica while the going was good. The bar-stools were covered in red leather, and the barman wore a solid gold bracelet round his wrist.

Two Nigerian businessmen were seated at lunch with a pair of whores. At a table in the corner I saw Jacques.

'Tiens?' he said, grinning. 'Still alive?'

'Thanks to you,' I said, 'and the Germans.'

'*Braves Bosches!*' He beckoned me to the banquette. 'Very intelligent people.'

'*Braves Bosches!*' I agreed.

'Let's have a bottle of champagne.'

'I haven't got much money.'

'Lunch is on me,' he insisted. 'Pierrot!'

The barman tilted his head, coquettishly, and tittered.

'Yes, Monsieur Jacques.'

'This is an English gentleman and we must find him a very special bottle of champagne. You have Krug?'

'No, Monsieur Jacques. We have Roederer. We have Bollinger, and we have Mumm.'

'Bollinger,' I said.

Jacques pulled a face: 'And in Guerini's time you could have had your oysters. Flown in twice a week from Paris ... Belons ... Claires ... Portugaises ...'

'I remember him.'

'He was a character.'

'Tell me,' I leaned over. 'What *was* going on?'

'Sssh!' His lips tightened. 'There are two theories, and if I think anyone's listening, I shall change the subject.'

I nodded and looked at the menu.

'In the official version,' Jacques said, 'the mercenaries were recruited by Dahomean émigrés in Paris. The plane took off from a military airfield in Morocco, refuelled in Abidjan ...'

One of the whores got up from her table and lurched down the restaurant towards the Ladies.

'66 was a wonderful year,' said Jacques, decisively.

'I like it even older,' I said, as the whore brushed past, 'dark and almost flat ...'

'The plane flew to Gabon to pick up the commander ... who is supposed to be an adviser to President Bongo ...' He

then explained how, at Libreville, the pilot of the chartered DC-8 refused to go on, and the mercenaries had to switch to a DC-7.

'So their arrival was expected at the airport?'

'Precisely,' Jacques agreed. 'Now the second scenario . . .'

The door of the Ladies swung open. The whore winked at us. Jacques pushed his face up to the menu.

'What'll you have?' he asked.

'Stuffed crab,' I said.

'The second scenario', he continued quietly, 'calls for Czech and East German mercenaries. The plane, a DC-7, takes off from a military airfield in Algeria, refuels at Conakry . . . you understand?'

'Yes,' I said, when he'd finished. 'I think I get it. And which one do you believe?'

'Both,' he said.

'That', I said, 'is a very sophisticated analysis.'

'This', he said, 'is a very sophisticated country.'

'I know it.'

'You heard the shooting at Camp Gezo?'

'What was that?'

'Settling old scores,' he shrugged. 'And now the Guineans have taken over the Secret Police.'

'Clever.'

'This is Africa.'

'I know and I'm leaving.'

'For England?'

'No,' I said. 'For Brazil. I've a book to write.'

'Beautiful country, Brazil.'

'I hope so.'

'Beautiful women.'

'So I'm told.'

'So what is this book?'

'It's about the slave-trade.'

'In Benin?'

'Also in Brazil.'

'Eh bien!' The champagne had come and he filled my glass. 'You have material!'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'I do have material.'